

Realize

Story: Realize

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Summary: When the world returned to its original state, memories never returned but some feelings remained. Subaru closed his heart, oblivious to them all. Chapter 1: The guy who introduced himself as Natsuki Subaru thanked him in an extravagant manner, spouting nonsense about heroism and gratitude. Reinhard wasn't really listening. Instead, he paid attention to Subaru's vacant eyes, the smile that would have looked obviously fake on anyone else, and the way he said his name with a distant affection. When Subaru was making excuse to leave, brown eyes glimmering, Reinhard couldn't help but reach out. He didn't know why but he felt like he'd cry if he let Subaru go.

***Chapter 1*: Reinhard**

Today was full of surprise.

It started with Reinhard saving a foreigner from thugs in an alley.

The guy who introduced himself as Natsuki Subaru thanked him in an extravagant manner, spouting nonsense about heroism and gratitude.

Reinhard wasn't really listening. Instead, he paid attention to Subaru's vacant eyes, the smile that would have looked obviously fake on anyone else, and the way he said his name with a distant affection.

When Subaru was making excuse to leave, brown eyes glimmering, Reinhard couldn't help but reach out.

He didn't know why but he felt like he'd cry if he let Subaru go.

Subaru stared at the grip on his arm, his eyes stayed dead, and said, "Then do you mind coming to this address later?"

He handed a note to Reinhard, written in the ugliest handwriting he'd ever seen.

Reinhard wasn't familiar with the address and he didn't know why Subaru wanted him to go there but he caught Subaru's face for a moment and in his emotionless smile, Reinhard could only see clear disinterest.

It didn't matter to Subaru whether Reinhard went or not. That was enough of a reason for him.

"When do you need me to be there?"

"Today. Anytime you're free," Subaru answered flippantly.

He made a move to leave, his smile fading to a dull expression and Reinhard grabbed his shoulder, still not willing to let go.

"Then, let's go now."

When Subaru's eyes widened, his feature softened into something more human, Reinhard felt a triumph of victory in his heart.

It didn't last long as Subaru's smile resurfaced, this time tinted by suspicion and contempt.

Subaru didn't trust him. That was okay. Reinhard could accept that.

I'll definitely save you, he swore in his heart.

Reinhard had saved a lot of people. He could save Subaru, even if it meant saving Subaru from himself.

Today was really full of surprise. Reinhard fought against the Bowel Hunter and found himself another King candidate to serve. His days usually weren't this eventful.

He turned to Subaru who smiled dispiritedly as if he didn't just save the King candidate, Lady Emilia from certain doom.

"Do you have a place to stay?" He asked.

His real question was *Do you want to live with me?*

He wished he could ask and he wished Subaru would say yes if only to give him a piece of mind, but in the few hours they spent time together, Reinhard noticed that Subaru was withdrawn to himself when he got too close.

One step at a time, he reminded himself.

Subaru patted his shoulder. His arm was bleeding, Reinhard noticed too late. He must have gotten hurt when fighting against the Bowel Hunter. An ordinary person would have been in too much pain to move it around.

"Don't worry about me, Reinhard."

How could I not? Reinhard wanted to scream. The desire to save Subaru only got stronger in every single second they spent together.

Subaru joked around a lot. He mocked Reinhard in a good-natured way. He laughed at Reinhard's serious attempt to make a joke. Throughout it all, Subaru's eyes were dead and unmoving.

"Where are you staying?"

"Let's see," Subaru pondered for a moment. "I'll stay with Roswaal for now."

"You'll stay with Lady Emilia?"

It wasn't the answer Reinhard was hoping for. Lady Emilia was kind but it didn't erase the stigma that came with being a half-elf. Subaru didn't seem to know this.

Would people treat Subaru kindly, if they knew that he was taken under Lady Emilia's protection?

Reinhard took one look at Subaru's blank smile.

"...If you're having a hard time, just come to me."

The suspicion returned to Subaru's eyes for a brief moment. It was perfectly hidden from untrained eyes.

"Thanks, Reinhard!" Subaru grinned.

Reinhard grinned back. He felt like he wanted to cry.

***Chapter 2*: Rem**

The boy who came to the mansion carried the witch's scent and a subtle smell of tobacco. Emilia welcomed him openly. Roswaal treated him like an important guest. Everybody in the village had come to adore him in a span of few weeks.

Rem wondered if the witch's scent was nothing but her own illusion.

Natsuki Subaru was a fragile little thing. He smiled like one tiniest crack would send him falling apart. It wasn't just his smile either. His laugh, his frown, his jokes. Rem felt like she was watching a surface of an empty void.

Maybe this was why she couldn't leave Subaru alone. She watched every single of his movement, waiting for him to fall down, making sure someone was there to catch him when it inevitably happened.

One night, Rem caught Subaru sneaking into the garden. He was smoking using a cheap old pipe, looking up to the sky in the absence of laughter and smiles.

"Are you here to kill me?" Subaru asked. He didn't move his head or give out any indication that he'd noticed his presence.

"Does Subaru have any reason to be killed by Rem?"

"Maybe," Subaru said. He didn't smile for once. Rem had no idea his usually expressive face could look so lifeless. Could it be possible that all his exaggerating act was just an imitation of human emotion? "Maybe I want you to kill me."

The words sent shivers down her spine. She didn't know why but the thought of Natsuki Subaru dying terrified her to the core.

"Why?"

Subaru ran a hand through his hair and didn't answer.

It occurred to her later that it might be the closest thing to a breakdown Subaru would ever show to her.

He was fine the next day, greeting her energetically as if the event of last night never happened.

"I need to take care of something in the village," he informed her.

"Rem will go with you," Rem quickly said, grabbing his hand before he could go further from her side.

Subaru looked at her like he wanted to push her away. It might be the first real emotion he ever showed on his face. It thrilled her. For the first time since Natsuki Subaru stepped foot into the mansion, he was within her reach.

I can see you, she thought joyfully. I can touch you.

She followed Subaru into the forest where they ran into a Demon Beast.

Subaru was hurt gravely from the incident but not once he gave an indication that he was in any pain.

It hurt to watch him smiling through the bleeding scars.

As a result of Subaru saving the missing kids from their potential death, Emilia's image improved, even if just a little.

He was already loved by the villagers and now the incident had turned him into a celebrity overnight.

Emilia personally tended to her injuries. Rem would be lying if she said she wasn't jealous.

On top of that, Reinhard made a fuss. He visited with a grim expression, his intimidating presence was somewhat negated by the flower bouquet and the bag of fruits he carried together in one hand.

Under Reinhard's and Emilia's smothering care, Subaru's smile withered even more.

"Why didn't you kill me?" He asked her when they were left alone.

"Does Subaru wanted to be killed?" Rem wondered out loud.

But she didn't want him to. Subaru didn't trust her, she knew, just like how she couldn't see past the witch's scent in his first few days in the mansion. And she was fine with that, as long as Subaru was alive.

Subaru smiled his fake empty smile and didn't answer.

***Chapter 3*: Julius**

Julius noticed him because he was wearing snobby clothes. It was bound to stand out among the clean-clothed knights. The orange scarf and the green jacket gave him the impression of a lost pitiful kid but the boy watched over the meeting as if he was meant to be there.

For some reason, it didn't feel right to leave him alone.

Julius approached him as soon as the meeting was done but the boy was already surrounded by various knights from different camps. He was pleasantly surprised to see Reinhard and Felix among them.

When he finally saw the boy up close, he thought he'd stopped breathing.

The boy noticed him, recognition passed over his feature. "Oh, hi, Julius."

He said his name in an overly familiar manner as if they were a lifetime friend.

Julius desperately searched in his memory but he couldn't remember ever meeting the boy with the broken smile. The boy himself was hardly forgettable, with his dark hair and brown eyes, and a face that clearly marked him as a foreigner.

Still, Julius had to ask, "Have we met before?"

"No," the boy answered easily. It sounded like a lie even though it was the truth. "I am Natsuki Subaru."

Normally, Julius didn't let a complete stranger address him in an informal manner but he supposed, for this boy who smiled like the world would crumble underneath his feet, he could make an exception.

The next time they met again, Subaru was organizing a meeting to track down the cult's movement and killed the White Whale.

He looked dependable and, at the same time, he looked like he'd collapsed under the pressure.

Julius couldn't tell if the party listened to him out of respect or pity. It had to be a combination of both.

"A lot of people will die in this mission," Subaru said. Then he smiled, his dead-fish eyes brightened up for a brief moment. "Maybe including me."

Subaru was basically saying *I don't give a damn about every single one of you*. Julius had an inkling, with the way Subaru detached himself from everything, but it still stung somehow, to hear him confirmed it himself that Julius was nothing more than a pebble in his path that he picked up on a whim.

"Way to raise our morals, Subaru-kyun," Felix mumbled.

"I won't die," Wilhelm said. He patted Subaru's shoulder, clear determination in his eyes. "And I won't let you die."

The other knights shared the same determination in their faces. At the very least, they didn't look like they were heading on a suicidal mission.

Hah, it was ironic how Subaru's rousing speech actually worked.

And since when the old man who was distant to his own grandson became close to Natsuki Subaru?

Subaru dismissed the meeting and stood alone, watching them with the same unchanging broken smile. Even if he was within Julius' eyesight, it felt like he stood worlds apart from everybody else.

"Subaru-kyun is weird, isn't he?" Felix whispered to him. "You just can't take your eyes off him."

Indeed. It felt like he'd disappeared into nothing if they looked away even if for just one second.

***Chapter 4*: Felix**

Subaru was strangely calm for someone whose friend had turned into an empty shell. Felix wondered if he even considered the Oni as his friend. He certainly didn't consider Felix as one.

That was okay for Felix. They only knew each other for a few days, not enough time for any real affection to be developed.

It was with this logic that Felix proposed to break the alliance while purposefully using hurtful words to lash out at Emilia.

When Subaru didn't smile, his face turned blank and expressionless. It was impossible to read anything from him.

Felix knew he shouldn't care. He didn't but-

Wilhelm and Crusch disagreed to break the alliance. Felix followed Crush's order, pretending he didn't feel relieved at the prospect of leaving Subaru to burden everything alone.

Felix looked for Subaru after the meeting was over with the intent to apologize. Regardless of his original goal for breaking off the alliance, it became clear to him that he would be the only one who got hurt if their friendship was cut off.

Subaru was smoking alone on the balcony when he found him. His face was young, but he acted as if he'd lived for hundred years.

"Felix," Subaru greeted him, blank-faced.

Seeing him standing alone at the edge of the balcony, the apology died in his throat. Instead, Felix said, "Subaru-kyun, you shouldn't smoke too much. It's not good for your health."

Subaru was just like a cat, he realized. He'd watched you from a respectable distance and hissed at you if you crossed his boundary.

Had Felix tried to apologize now, Subaru would push him away.

When Subaru didn't bother to put up a mask, he used minimal words and a clipped tone. This Subaru was so different from Subaru during the day, but neither of them felt real. Felix could tell that he just barely scratched the surface of the bottomless void named Natsuki Subaru.

"You don't have to look at me like that," Subaru said, his breath smelled of tobacco.

"Look at you like what?"

"Like I am a tragic main character," the empty smile returned. "Everybody carries some kind of burden. You too," he glanced at Felix, brown eyes narrowed in the darkness of the night sky.

Felix heard what he didn't say. *So mind your own damn business.*

Subaru turned to face him, leaning against the balcony with an old pipe in one hand. Now that Felix recognized the distrust and hatred in his eyes, he wondered how he could miss them before.

Since Subaru was that kind of person, Felix had to be the patient one. He could work with that.

***Chapter 5*: Roswaal**

Natsuki Subaru appeared like an unpredictable storm.

One ordinary morning, the boy suddenly dropped in the mansion unannounced. He casually walked past the security and stormed the office.

"So, you can be surprised too, Joker," the boy remarked, sitting on the couch with a darkly amused expression.

At the time, Roswaal hadn't known his name yet, but he could already tell this boy was more important than life itself.

"I don't know who this 'Joker' is, but I assume he is a charming young man."

"Nope, he is a terrible clown," he said, and he didn't explain anything further.

Roswaal was hoping the word Joker to be some sort of code.

As Natsuki Subaru started settling in the mansion as his guest, it became increasingly obvious that everything he said meant less than the fluttering flowers on autumn. Beautiful, but ultimately meaningless.

He faded into the background more often than not. Always watching, waiting, keeping his distance. Like a cat.

Something was wrong with him. Some uncalculated errors, maybe. Or perhaps, an undetected truth.

Roswaal tried to look at him in the eyes without feeling like he was looking at a distorted reflection of the world.

"Emilia is leaving to the royal capital." He dropped casually during lunch. "Subaru, don't you want to go?"

Emilia already parted this morning. She insisted on not involving Natsuki Subaru. Roswaal lied with his smile and wished her good luck for the meeting.

Natsuki Subaru didn't react beyond glancing at him briefly.

"Stop it, Roswaal," he said, cutting his steak with a clumsy table manner.

"Stop what?" Roswaal challenged, intrigued for once.

Subaru's hand stopped moving. He looked up and smiled. Before this, Subaru never bothered to smile when there were only two of them.

"Your dream," he said. "It's futile."

It didn't sound like an insult. Subaru stated it like it was a simple fact they couldn't avoid.

His indifference, the apathy in his eyes, told Roswaal everything.

Subaru tilted his head, smile widening into an amused smirk. "I'll go, Joker. Don't make that face."

When Rem volunteered to accompany him, his smile disappeared. Roswaal almost laughed. Who was the terrible clown between them, really?

The next time Roswaal saw him again, Subaru was dressed in a plain green jacket and orange scarf and, for once, looked a little more humane.

"I want to disappear," he said, holding a smoking pipe in one hand, his expression utterly defeated.

Roswaal was the patient wrapped in bandages, but Subaru looked at the world like he was scattered all over.

Roswaal eyed him warily. He wasn't sure if he wanted to deal with this buried side of Subaru, the side that would disappear as soon as he stepped out of the room.

"Unfortunately, I still need you," Roswaal said bluntly. "You can't disappear yet."

That much was true. They still needed to get out of the Sanctuary. Regardless of their belief in her, Emilia couldn't do it without him.

Subaru smiled. Already, it almost looked like Subaru from two seconds ago never existed. Roswaal didn't know how to handle this side of Subaru either.

"What if I told you that you already achieved your dream?"

Roswaal almost snorted. Then something occurred to him.

It was an embarrassingly slow realization.

"Oh," he said.

Subaru laughed, unrestrained with a hint of absolute madness. Everything about him had always felt like a carefully manufactured dream, and his laugh was no different. "You finally get it now?"

"Who-"

"Emilia," Subaru cut in, his voice still high-pitched with hysteria. "It's Emilia."

Everything made sense now. Everything crashed and had come to an end.

"Roswaal, cancel the attack on the mansion."

It was Roswaal's turn to laugh. "Why should I? Nothing matters anymore."

Subaru chuckled, light and almost teasing. It sounded fake and meaningless like the rest of him.

"You're right." He blew smoke to his face, eyes already turning dull.

Roswaal laid down and turned his back on him.

Before Subaru left, he had to ask, "But why did Emilia do that?"

"I don't know," Subaru said. "I gave her everything she wanted. She was happy with me." His tone turned icy cold. "Or, at least, I thought so."

Roswaal closed his eyes, feeling the weight of the world collapse under his fingertips. If he cried that night, well, at least nobody was around to witness it.